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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the results of a study of 46 Canadian couples who had delayed childbearing and experienced their first parenthood when the wife was 30 years or older. Both husbands and wives were interviewed using a questionnaire containing closed and open-ended questions. Summaries of the parents' observations are discussed in the following areas: planning children; factors influencing timing of the pregnancy; reading child rearing books; outside pressures to be parents; sex of the child; employment and pregnancy; breastfeeding; employer relations; prenatal classes; help at home after birth of child; emotional adjustment after birth of child; relationship to parents after birth of child; relationship to in-laws after birth of child; housekeeping standards after birth of child; present child care arrangements; future plans for more children; post-natal classes; future plans for child; impact on social life of parents; and impact on marital relationship. In the conclusion to the interview findings, advice and comments are offered to prospective "postponed parents" from the couples involved in the study. (DST)

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Postponed Parenthood: A Canadian Study

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Abstract

The latest Canadian data indicates that 20 percent of births in Canada are to women aged 30 years and over. Postponed Parenthood has become an increasing viable option for Canadian couples. This paper reports on a study of 46 couples who delayed their childbearing. It is the first Canadian study in this area of family life.

To have a baby when you are well over thirty is not just a case of "panic-breeding," a failure of nerve when faced with the shortness of life, the inadequacy of personal achievement, and the basic loneliness of every individual.

The birth of a child can be, and is for many women, an opening up of the new, an unfolding of love, not only for the baby, but perhaps for those from whom we have been guarding and protecting ourselves, and a step on the journey toward deeper understanding of ourselves and others. We can never possess our children. But through them, and with their help, we have a chance to grow as human beings.

Sheila Kitzinger. Birth Over Thirty.
New York, Penguin, 1985, p. 172.

A Canadian Study of Postponed Parenthood

For this study, ninety-two (92) individuals (forty-six couples) were interviewed. They all had at least one child. At the time the parents were questioned, the youngest child that was involved was just under four months while the oldest couple's first born was thirty-two years old. The ages of the couples ranged from the early thirties to one woman who was in her mid-sixties. They primarily lived within a forty-mile radius of Metropolitan Toronto and worked within the same area. It was our impression that in most cases, the wives initiated the couple's involvement in the project by responding to the newspaper article, which requested volunteers.

The majority of the respondents considered themselves to be Canadians, with their ethnic origin primarily European. As a result, their religious affiliation was primarily Protestant or Catholic.

In general they were well educated, usually with some post-secondary education. The wives tended to be slightly less educated than their husbands, but the two were fairly consistent. A large number of them had professional training, with many of the women tending to have done post-graduate work in such fields as teaching or social work. The husbands tended to have studied in the more traditionally male areas, such as engineering. Occupationally they were engaged in careers which were primarily professional, managerial or technical in nature. As couples they had worked an average of eleven years, with the men having worked nearly a year longer. Their salaries averaged over $35,000.00 when combined, and many were much higher.

The mothers, on the whole, took some form of maternity leave, which was paid, usually through unemployment insurance. A large number of the women (twenty-two) had not returned to work, at the time of the study, and twelve were only working part time. Most of the men did not take time off work because of the birth of the baby.

Geographically, this was a fairly stable group, having lived in their present community for nearly twenty years on the average. The majority of the families owned their own homes, which were largely single family units. They often had been purchased before the arrival of the first child, but the property was chosen with family expansion as a possibility.

Thirty percent of the couples had lived together before marriage for under one year. Our couples had been married to each other for an average of twelve years. They had an average of 1.6 children, which is consistent with national figures.

The couples themselves came from what would be considered normal-sized families for the times in which they were born, of three to four children, although one woman had twelve siblings. In terms of their birth order, they tended to fall within the first through the third born.

It appears that the couples who were interviewed were fairly consistent in terms of their cultural, educational and economic backgrounds. They shared fairly common experiences that seem to result from their being well educated, financially secure, established in the community and possessing stable marriages. Aside from their delayed parentage, their profile does little to distinguish them from the average, Canadian, middle-class family.

A questionnaire containing closed and open-ended questions was used to interview husbands and wives.

FINDINGS

Planning Children. When asked if they planned to have children when they were married, the majority of the men and the women stated yes. This seems to indicate that not only did most of these people plan to have children, but they chose spouses that felt the same way.

A majority of the couples discussed having children before marriage, apparently showing that it was a topic of concern to them and an issue they needed to deal with as part of planning their lives together.

Over half of the couples agreed that the decision to have their first child was a mutual decision, with a quarter of the men feeling their wives were the first to bring up the subject. This seems to be evidence that these couples made this decision together, simultaneously, with both of them recognizing that they were ready, indicating fairly mature relationships with healthy communication.

Factors Influencing Timing of the Pregnancy. For women, the biological time clock (over age 30), economic stability, her career, and the reluctance of the spouse to have a child earlier were factors in postponing parenthood.

For the men, financial security, maturity, and a good lifestyle were the factors taken into consideration.

Reading Child Rearing Books. A large number of the women and many of the men read child rearing books before, during and after the pregnancy. The women continued to read after the birth of the baby although the number of men reading at this time dropped off dramatically. This could mean that the women are assuming primary responsibility for the baby's care

immediately after the baby is born and they feel obligated to refer to books for information, whereas the men have less input and therefore less need to know this material. It could also indicate a lack of resources, such as friends or family, to consult regarding child rearing, so these mothers turn to books for guidance.

Outside Pressures. The majority of the couples felt they had experienced no outside pressure to have their first child.

Most of the couples had discussed what effects having a child would have on them in terms of how they would need to adjust their lifestyle and their relationship. They had also discussed the sharing of domestic chores usually with their spouse.

Sex of the Child. Once they had made the decision to have their baby, most of the couples, did not attach much importance to the sex of the child, although 26% of the women wanted a boy.

Work. Slightly more than half of the women took some time off work before the birth of the baby, which could indicate a desire to prepare the home for the child's arrival.

Breast Feeding. In keeping with the current emphasis on breast feeding, 80% of the women intended to breast feed.

Employers. Most of the couples found that their employers were supportive during the pregnancy which seems to negate the fear that many career people have that having children will create negative feelings on the part of their employers. Statistically, more women found their employers

supportive, with thirty-four of them feeling they were supported as compared to twenty-three of the men.

Pre-natal Classes. A total of ninety-one of those who responded attended pre-natal classes, finding them most valuable for information. Very few of them, saw them as useful in terms of meeting other couples, which seems to indicate that these people were not looking for social contacts.

Just over 50% of the women had an ultra sound test. Few of them, probably because of their age and the risks involved, had amniocentesis.

Help at Home. Even though a large number of the respondents stated that they had help when they returned home from the hospital, the majority had no help when they were interviewed. This seems to indicate that, for most of them, the use of external support systems is a short-term prospect that they use only long enough to regain equilibrium and establish routines.

Of those couples who responded to the question of their spouse's participation in the night-time routines, 39% of the wives stated that their spouse did not participate in this part of the care of the baby, but 60% did assist in some way. Despite the large number of women who breast fed, some men still managed to stay involved in some way. It is also interesting to note that 28% of the men stated that their wives did not participate in the night-time routine.

Feelings during the first month following the birth of the baby.

a) overworked

There was a significant difference between the male and female respondents' feelings of being overworked one month after the birth of their first child.

Only 10 men felt very overworked and 22 women felt very overworked. This might suggest that the birth of the first child made a more significant impact on the mothers than the fathers. The arrival of the first child had more effect on more female respondents than male respondents.

b) happiness

There was a significant difference between the male and female respondents' feelings of happiness one month after the birth of their first child. Thirty-seven men felt very happy yet only 23 women felt very happy. This finding seems to bear some relation to the previous one.

c) bored and fulfilled

There was not a significant difference between the sexes when it came to feelings of boredom or fulfillment. Most of the respondents did not feel bored at all. Again, most of the respondents felt "somewhat" or "very fulfilled".

d) feeling isolated

There was a significant difference between the sexes when it came to their recollections of feeling isolated one month after the birth of the baby. Only 2 men felt very isolated, but 32 women felt "somewhat" or "very" isolated. This reflects clearly the new division of labour in the respondents' homes. The majority of the couples chose to have the wives stay at home and care for the infant and the fathers continued to work. Many of the women who had left active careers, had feelings of isolation in their new roles as mothers.

e) feeling depressed

There was a significant difference between whether the males felt depressed or whether the women felt depressed. None of the men remembered feeling

very depressed and only 4 remembered feeling somewhat depressed one month after the birth of their first baby. On the other hand, 17 women felt somewhat depressed and 8 women felt very depressed. It would seem that this finding relates closely with the feelings of isolation and sense of being overworked mentioned previously.

Relationship to Parents after birth of the child. Our respondents were asked to describe their relationship with their parents since the birth of their first babies. Only few women felt their relationship was less close, while the majority felt it was closer. Of the women, one third felt that it had not changed significantly. Of the men, half felt that it had not changed significantly while half felt that it had become closer. Most of all respondents felt that the experience of having a baby had brought them closer to their own parents.

With regards to parents as supports the findings are less positive. Some respondents appear to miss the emotional support of their parents who are either living out of town or are too old to provide the support they would like for themselves and their children. For example, one respondent reported that she feels sad when her children's friends go out with their grandparents on a Saturday afternoon. Her parents are "too old to babysit, let alone taking them for an afternoon outing."

Relationship to In-laws after the birth of the baby. With regards to the respondent's relationship with their parents-in-law, again a majority felt that the experience of becoming parents had brought them closer together. The female respondents were equally divided between describing their relationship as the same, or as closer. However, 24 male respondents felt

closer to their in-laws and over one third of the males felt the relationship had not changed. It appears as if the respondents' relationships with their parents may have changed more significantly than with their parents-in-law.

Housekeeping standards since the birth of the baby. The respondents were asked whether their housekeeping standards had changed since the birth of their first baby. It was interesting to note that of both sexes, only 4 male and 4 female respondents felt that their housekeeping standards had become higher. Of the women, one third felt their housekeeping standards had remained the same and 60% of the women felt that their standards had lowered. Only 43% of the men felt that their standards had lowered and 48% felt that things had remained the same.

Present Child Care Arrangements. The majority of our respondents indicated that the wife remained at home after the birth of the child, with the use of babysitters in the evenings. Only a few used day care (3).

Planning to have more children. The respondents were all asked whether they were planning to have more children. Nineteen male respondents were not planning on having any more. Of the men, half responded that they were planning more, and few were undecided. Again, the results were very similar between the sexes. This may be a condition of delayed child-bearing couples. Perhaps it can be suggested that older parents discuss and share their ideas to a significant degree. Of the female respondents, 40% did not plan on having more children and 55% did. Of the women, few were undecided. It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents still plan on having more children despite the fact that they are delayed

child bearers and have already felt some pressure in terms of the biological time clock for their first borns.

Attending post-natal classes. With regards to post-natal classes all the respondents were asked whether they attended or not. Of the female respondents, 28% said they did and only few of the male respondents said they did. The majority of all the respondents did not attend post-natal classes.

Breast-feeding the baby. The female respondents were asked whether they breast fed and if they did, they were asked for how long. Forty women did breast feed their first baby.

Future Plans for the Child. Table 1, contains some of the future hopes of the parents for their child.

Table 1 Future Expectations of the "delayed" child by the Parents

Good Education	Go to University
Be Independent	Be Healthy
Obedient	Be Happy
Affectionate	Have goals in life
Enjoy Life	Have a good career
Be a Reader	Have a good character
Go to Private School	Be Intelligent
Responsible Adult	Be a Leader

Open-Ended Questions

In these questions, we left it open for our subjects to state their own responses.

1. The Impact on the Social Life

Table 2, presents some of the factors related to the social life of the parents after the birth of the baby.

Table 2: Impact on Social Life of Baby on Parents	
less money to go out	invite people to home
has declined	feeling tied down
less freedom	more with couples and children
loss of spontaneous activities	go out separately more
more home centered	child focused social life

Some of the comments were -

- We still see the same friends--not as often perhaps and now most times together are with the children so activities often are different. However, we do plan occasional adult times with our friends.
- We did not go out as a couple for the first 3 months-after that, we did start socializing again, although at a reduced level. We have found there just isn't time to do much, with all the extra household duties, etc.

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- Not = great deal. We used to go out to the movies, so we bought a VCR to watch them at home. We still visit friends and relatives and take the baby with us. We still entertain at home.

- No "spur of the moment" activities anymore, which I miss, even going to the movies is a major outing now! Other than that, Michelle hasn't affected our social life too much--we just take her with us.

- I am no longer as free to spontaneously go out. I miss the theatre and outings in Toronto with friends, however, I am now included more often by friends with children, to take part in child-oriented activities.

2) The Impact on the Marital Relationship

Table 3, has some of the changes as expressed by the men and women.

Table 3: Impact on the Marital Relationship of Men and Women

less romantic	more commitment
more serious	happier
less care free	more in common
more practical	less time to talk to each other
improved relationship	some friction
more certain in relationship	help more in house
more time together	share roles more
brought out new qualities	good effect on us
closer	talk more about child

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Some of the comments were -

- Our relationship was great before but much richer now in that we have a family. We seem to talk about our child with each other constantly. We laugh much more and have more fun generally.

- Seems to be on hold, at times, unless we make a real effort to put the romance in--becoming easier as children are getting older.

- Initially I really resented not doing things with my husband since our companionship was based on a lot of shared interests and a baby needed someone's full attention. This is less of a problem now.

- I hoped that we would share the duties of looking after the baby, but that is not the case. My husband enjoys playing with the baby, and I do not mind providing all the care. Actually I feel guilty that I can stay at home and look after the baby while my husband must go to work.

- On the whole it's good, but I feel resentful at times that my husband doesn't help with Michael as much as I expected him too. He "forgets" that I work full time outside the home and then come home to all the regular chores and baby to see to as well. Sometimes I think he "forgets" that we have a baby!

3. Impact on Yourself as a Person

Table 4, has some of the items which men and women indicated, and which were related to how the birth of a child affected them on a personal level.

Table 4: Impact of Child on Personal Changes of Men and Women	
Women	Men
show emotions more	mellowed a lot
not as fussy as in past	values have changed
more settled	more responsibility
less selfish	career less important
more caring	priorities have changed
enriched life	happier
more fulfilled	more contented
have to admit limits	outlet for love, affection
not as flighty	more tolerant
more understanding	less self-centered
love of family life	do more things

Some of the comments were -

- Made me realize that I am a private person who needs more time to herself--but also realizing I can cope with difficulty at times with the responsibility of a child.
- 100% improvement--being 40 lbs. overweight before my pregnancy and then retaining 13 lbs. after the birth, I joined Weight Watchers in September 1981 and reached my goal of losing 53 lbs. by April 1982. So apart from the obvious physical appearance, I feel I am a whole new person since the child was born.
- I feel I have become more compassionate and caring towards other people (and children especially). Except during the first month, I have become more even-tempered and generally happier. My life has more purpose and meaning now than it did before.

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- I'm rather confused--am I a mother? Career person? I need more stimulation and I lack motivation. My attention span seems to be shorter. I need more contact and more praise from the outside world.

- Great impact! I have tapped into a part of me I didn't know was there. There is so much more love, concern, patience and friendship to give my child, myself and others. My home has become more important. I have learned so much!

4) Impact on Sexual Life

Table 5, contains some of the factors related to the impact of the child on the sexual life of the mothers and fathers, during the first year after birth.

Table 5: Impact of the Sexual Life on Men and Women (first year afterbirth)

Women	Men
very tired	not a high priority
less frequent	a drastic decrease
declines a little	less privacy
less spontaneity	more tensions
birth control important	improves as child older

Some comments were -

- Sexual activity has been at a minimum for the first few months due to the demands upon us for our time and efforts.

- The frequency decreased considerably during the pregnancy and right after the birth. Only now are we getting back to our previous pattern.

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- The lovemaking is as good as always--it just isn't always where and when we would prefer.

- We have decreased our sexual life from years ago. However, since having our first baby and now second we have sex less often. Before our first baby's birth we were trying "very hard" for a year and a half. It wore us out!

- Sex during pregnancy was wonderful. My emotions are in conflict, but gradually we are finding sex to be more fulfilling.

- We now make love on a schedule--more or less. It's difficult to be spontaneous when your child is up and about. When our son was younger, I was simply too tired.

5. Advice to Prospective "Postponed Parents"

We asked -

> "If you were asked to give advice to prospective delayed childbearing couples, what would you say?" We will present the verbation comments.

- I feel delayed childbearing couples are more emotionally prepared--although in my case, my career was secondary and still is. I think the child is appreciated so much more when it is planned.

- Don't wait too long. The more established you become in whatever routines, the harder it is to accommodate a baby. Hence I think you are less patient, tolerant, etc.

- Complete major projects, e.g., house renovation, beforehand.

- It is great to wait until the time is "right". You have nothing to offer a child until your marriage is solid and your selves are clear and strong. Financial security is not nearly as important but is certainly helpful.

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- Know yourself. Discuss, discuss, discuss what you think having a child will be like (then be prepared for a shock!!!). Have some help and some finances for a once-in-a-while break. Share duties--child and home. Enjoy!

- Don't give in to pressure--you'll know when it's the right time so decide for yourselves. Make absolutely sure that this is what <u>each</u> of you wants--it's for keeps.

- Don't worry about being too old--what you lack in energy, you gain in maturity and patience.

- Find out more about childcare not just from books but from other couples. Learn to handle babies, change diapers, etc. Meet neighbours, etc. with babies and talk to them before birth. Join mothers and babies groups as soon as possible after birth. In the hospital get a single room. Have someone who can help with breast feeding come to the hospital.

- It's a must to have a weekend or even just a day away from the baby whenever possible, especially in the first few months after the birth. Also make sure baby duties are shared equally and that this continues especially after Mum has gone back to work.

- Try to build a support system with someone to whom you are close. Have someone come in to do routine chores, if possible, so that you have more time to yourself and with your extended family.

- You will probably really enjoy all aspects of your children because you may well be "ready" for them now. Don't wait <u>too</u>

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long because after one you may want several more and the biological clock is ticking away, especially for the woman. Evaluate your reasons for "delaying" and make sure that for your situation they are really valid.

We also asked if there was anything the subjects would like to add to our questions. Some of the following quotes came from female respondents.

- My main concern during pregnancy for both children was their health because of my age. Thankfully they are both in perfect health mentally and physically. I was also concerned about being thought of by them as being "too old"--so far that has not been a problem.

- Most important is that the couple--no matter what age--have something to truly offer a child. There isn't room for "working out" a couple's problems when a child is in need of security, love and guidance. The child must be offered consistency and the couple needs to be "together".

- I'm happy that our son is here, however with working full time (my own choice) I find at times I'm extremely tired when I leave work, and then to go home and start work (house work) all over again is difficult.

- I have decided not to return to work until my baby is about 2 years old. I am very concerned about finding suitable employment at that time and what affect my time off will have on my future, in the long run.

- I have the maturity to deal with the child, the family, and the pressure on women to be in the work force and not at home.

Two men also commented:

- Enjoy your family, take time to play and have fun. When they ask for your help and attention it is important sometimes to forget

.../10

the dishes or sports activities, cleaning the house as they only are young for a short period of time. Turn off the TV, give them time with the grandparents, let them visit other people on their own, let them think, laugh and play.

- Parents constantly talk about their children--this can be very boring for childless couples to be in the company of parenting couples--and there can be impact on friendships due to a birth! We're careful with our childless friends...